

# Developing Speaking Skills by Creating Our Own Simulations for the EFL Courses

---

*By Beatriz Chelle de Porto*

The purpose of simulations is to have students interact in meaningful and realistic contexts, generating their own discourse. Simulations also provide a background for the integration of the four skills and for the development of language-learning strategies, fostering peer correction and self-assessment.

Developing oral skills is a real challenge for many EFL school teachers since the students do not live in an English speaking environment and most of them attend schools where English is taught as a curricular subject (for example, 120 minutes a week). In this context, it has traditionally been very difficult to achieve good standards of oral production because the input students receive is insufficient. There are too few classroom hours, and most teachers, although proficient in the target language, are not native speakers of English. In addition, it is difficult to find realistic situations which motivate the students to communicate in the foreign language.

My question so far has been the following: How can we, EFL teachers who work with teenage students who do not need to communicate in the foreign language, motivate them to speak in English? I have found that the best way was simply by "playing and having fun" in the classroom situation, since for them language learning is mostly considered a classroom activity whether we like it or not.

I therefore try to move from controlled pair work (including repetition and dialog memorization, which proved to be very important in developing fluency and learning pronunciation) to creative sketches where students had to decide what to say and how to say it.

Simulations are a good way of integrating speaking and daily classroom activities because they can be adapted to the requirements of the syllabus and the textbook of the course and are also an excellent way of introducing culture. Some simulations I created are "A Trip to England," "A Restaurant in London," "The Shopping Mall," and "A Street in NYC."

## **Working it Out**

In my classes each simulation started by describing the setting and the characters. That is, each student was assigned a character, either at random or by having the pupil choose the one s/he preferred. All the characters were organized into families, were work-mates, or were assigned special roles in the simulation. In "The Mall," for example, all students were employees or owners of the shops in a mall in Manhattan. In "A Trip to England," some were the members of the crew and the rest were passengers organized into families.

To help the students keep a record of their characters, it is useful to have them fill out forms to define each role clearly: its personality, family links, job, history, projects. This can be done gradually as the simulation evolves since at a second stage interactions start occurring.

In "The Street," for instance, the students are grouped into families, workers, or shop owners. Some are professionals; there are old and young people who greet each other, argue, discuss problems, ask for information, sell, buy, or apply for jobs. All these interactions are organized by the teacher, who acts as a controller of the activity. The result is that these simulations become, to a certain extent, the spinal cord of the course, where functions, patterns, vocabulary, and even culture can be introduced, practiced, and recycled. The teacher plans this activity from beginning to end, breaking it down into sets of role-plays in which every student participates, without forgetting to plan its ending, which is in general chosen by the students. For example, in "The Mall" all the characters won the lottery prize and decided to take a trip together; in "The Street" participants decided to demolish shops to build a shopping center.

In my experience, it is helpful to organize sets of role-plays around content areas. These content areas are topics derived from materials already discussed in class, which could be used as a starting point for the sketches the students produce. This provides a contextualized background that allows students to "shift from comprehension-based activities to controlled production activities, and finally to activities which require the learner to engage in real communicative interaction" (Nunan 1989:118).

This results in meaningful use of the target language, not mere manipulation, and realistic contextualized communication, since this activity involves the interplay of verbal strategies (functions, mimicry, register, intonation, pronunciation, inferences) and the knowledge and understanding of different cultural practices and habits (complimenting, ordering, body language). On the other hand, as students are "masked" behind a new identity, they generally overcome shyness and feel free to express themselves and to act out their sketches. They play and have fun and do not view this activity as classroom work at all.

Finally, as the main purpose of this activity is having students generate their own discourse, the use of this technique has an important motivational value for them, especially if we take into account that they do not have many chances in the local environment to communicate in the target language.

As a consequence, the students get involved immediately and feel eager to participate, not only because of the extrinsic motivation that results from interacting in realistic contexts, but also because they are intrinsically motivated to express themselves, use their imagination, and be creative.

## **Procedure**

First of all, it is necessary for the students to keep a record of all aspects related to their characters (by means of forms or diaries). The teacher has to keep another record of the

interactions which occurred, organized in sets and filed in chronological order, so as to maintain coherence and, if possible, create suspense.

Example: "A Restaurant in London" (16 students [ss]):

*The Restaurant* (3 ss): owners: the father (cook), the mother (helps the father), the son (the waiter)

*The Grocery Store* (3 ss): owners: the father, the mother, and the son (he is the milkman)

*The Post Office* (2 ss): an employee and the postman

*The Bed and Breakfast* (4 ss): the owner and three foreign students

*The Club* (3 ss): the secretary and the football coach

*The Video Club* (2 ss): the owner and the employee

PART 1: "Getting to know each other." The students work in groups with their families or work-mates. They describe themselves (appearance, nationality, likes, personality, their houses, etc.)

PART 2: The teacher plans the sets of role-plays and writes guidelines for each group. An example of what a first set of role-plays can be is the following:

*"Getting in touch": The teacher prepares slips of paper (as in the examples below) and the students gettogether and prepare the dialogs. It is very important at this stage that all the students participate and are included in one of the sketches, all of which occur simultaneously.*

Early in the morning at the Post Office: The employee is giving the postman the letters to be delivered.

The owner of the Bed and Breakfast is talking with the milkman. They greet each other, ask and answer questions about the new students. Then, the postman arrives, greets everyone, and explains that he has some letters for the students. The students appear and introduce themselves.

The coach and the secretary are at the restaurant. They order lunch. The cook calls his wife and asks her to go to the grocery store to do some shopping because there is nothing left. They write down the shopping list, and she leaves. Meanwhile, another customer arrives, but there is nothing left, only leftovers!

After the students interact and conduct the role-play, the teacher prepares the third, fourth (or the necessary number) sketch until the simulation is completed. The number of the sets of role plays to be included and the content to be practiced and recycled is up to the teacher and if possible negotiated with the students.

## Acting it Out

When the students are asked to interact and conduct the role-play, three phases should be observed: rehearsal, performance, and debriefing (using Di Pietro's words (1987), even if the way in which they are described here differs and does not correspond exactly to his definitions).

### ***Rehearsal:***

The teacher gives out slips of paper, with the instructions for the groups mentioning the students who work together and a general reference to the topic of the conversation (as in the before-mentioned examples). These are mere guidelines which can be integrated to any conversation. What and how it is said is decided by the students.

Students can write down the script and may ask the teacher to give an opinion or some advice. More advanced students can just sketch an outline of how the interaction may progress. The idea is to have the students gain confidence and fluency so as to gradually shift to an improvisation-like activity.

At this stage it is important to make sure that the following points are carried out:

- The students know exactly what they have to do and understand the instructions.
- They understand the ground rules: The discussion should be in the target language, even if the students' native tongue could be accepted in some special instances (e.g., beginners). But in either case, the final product has to be in good English. This means students would be consulting dictionaries, grammar books, textbooks, or other useful material.
- The dialogs students write have to be clear, coherent, logically sequenced, and well-balanced so that every member of the group has a chance to participate in its creation and performance. If the roleplay is to be filmed, students have to agree on the stage, customs, makeup, etc.

### ***The teacher should proceed as follows:***

- Make certain that the students know exactly what they are supposed to do.
- Help the groups in need of assistance to find solutions by suggesting ways, possibilities, and viewpoints that would help them carry out their task.
- Be prepared to model utterances in the target language, as required, and to give explanations. At this stage the attention is drawn to accuracy; the teacher has to correct the students' productions-written and oral- before they act them out for the class.
- If the teacher feels the need to provide further practice, s/he should take notes during the role-play for points that students should practice in the debriefing phase.
- Observe the group dynamics to cater to different kinds of problems or characteristics of the students (shy, talkative, cooperative), to foster cooperation and mutual tolerance, and to find out about the students' learning strategies: "We know that students need to develop a range of skills, not only related to language, but also to learning and learning-how-to-learn" (Nunan 1989:94).

### ***Performance:***

In a certain way, the performance is the shortest phase of the activity, but the one the students enjoy the best. Each group is invited to play the sketch they prepared. Obviously, even if the scripts are written beforehand, students are not allowed to look at them. The scripts are just guides for the students, and if someone changes or forgets part of it, the others have to help them so as to keep the conversation going. It is important that students become aware of different communication strategies such as paraphrasing, making gestures, and asking for feedback.

In the case of traditional role plays, the first requirement is a framework; that is, the teacher or one of the performers explains the theme of the sketch to the audience. Generally, in simulations this is not necessary for the context, and the characters are well-known to the students. But if this is important for comprehension, then students should be provided some guidance as to the procedure to be followed.

It is important to record on a video cassette all the production so as to analyze individual and group progress and understand how the activity transpired. In some cases, students who were never filmed before were reluctant to be filmed. The teacher can let students know that nobody, unless agreed with the class, will see the film. It may also help to show the class what other students have produced. There are always groups of students willing to show everybody what they did!

### ***Debriefing:***

In this phase, the teachers plays the role of discussion leader. At this stage, peer correction, self-assessment, and self-evaluation are fostered. Attention is drawn to how well the performers attained their goal. The focus is on fluency rather than accuracy, with the following points of emphasis:

- How well did the students make themselves understood, including what they said (appropriate vocabulary, etc.), and how did they say it (intonation, pronunciation, etc.)?
- What strategies kept the conversation going (mainly through peer support, asking questions, making gestures, improvising, etc.)?

Much research has been done in this area, and the general conclusion is that "practice makes perfect"-the more we speak (or write) the better we become at these activities. "It is within the matrix of fluent speech that accuracy can actually develop" (Rivers 1987).

These guidelines should foster students' comments and questions about, among other things, grammar and vocabulary. At this stage, we can say the best way of contextualizing grammar and the teaching of vocabulary is by starting with the pupils' own performances. In many cases, the students themselves can give an answer to those questions and provide clear and correct explanations or examples. In other cases, the teacher may want to clarify or round up items, give reinforcement, and provide further practice.

## **The Classroom Atmosphere**

If interaction is the aim, it is necessary to create a suitable atmosphere that would allow students to express themselves freely and make them feel eager to communicate, to "mean" in the foreign language. A teacher- centered classroom would never provide the opportunities for the students to interact.

The classroom, thus, must be a non-threatening environment where students are eager to communicate and where the focus is on the process of learning, not on error correction. Errors should be viewed as a natural part of the learning process, never as a drawback.

Students should care about their own and other students' progress and should share projects, goals, and interests if we expect interaction to occur and if we look forward to introducing creativity, imagination, and fun to our classrooms.

## **Integrating the Four Skills**

The four skills can be integrated successfully in simulations by working with content areas. Students are asked to look for information in newspapers, magazines, books, ads, maps, menus, recordings, or by interviewing native speakers. They are later asked to use the information collected for their oral interactions (ordering, planning a trip, giving advice, applying for a job, reporting), and in written follow-up activities (diaries, newspapers, postcards, stories).

## **Evaluation**

As previously said, the focus is on the process, on how the students improved their performances, and, of course, the final product achieved. All along the process, students are stimulated to gain accuracy (rehearsal phase) and fluency (performance phase), keeping in mind that errors should be corrected so as to have students learn from their own mistakes (Klassen 1991).

On the other hand, simulations fulfill the requirements of interactive, proficiency-oriented tests where students are put in situations where they hear and react to real uses of the target language or where what they read is to be incorporated into some further language-using activity, which replicates normal uses of language as much as is feasible (Rivers 1987:13).

## **Why This Technique**

For the teacher, simulations provide an opportunity to develop accuracy and fluency (Hammerly 1991) and to practice the four skills. On the other hand, students develop strategies not only related to language learning, but also to learning-how-to-learn, placing students within an atmosphere of collaborative work.

Simulations keep students highly motivated, giving them a chance to be involved in creative language use, to be exposed to the language as a system, to derive input from authentic

resources, to develop strategies that will be of importance in their learning processes, and to develop skills of self-monitoring and self- evaluation.

Students also learn to cooperate with classmates each time a new set of sketches is proposed with new groups.

In this way, all the students are integrated and learn to be tolerant and to adapt to new working groups and situations. This results in a holistic view of the learning process where the cognitive and humanistic aspects contribute to the student's and the teacher's personal growth.

**Beatriz Chelle de Porto** is a teacher of English as a foreign language

## References

- Bygate, M. 1987. *Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Di Pietro, R. 1987. *Strategic interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammerly, H. 1991. Fluency and accuracy: Toward balance in language teaching and learning. Clevedon, UK: Multi-lingual Matters Ltd.
- Hyland, K. 1993. Language-learning simulations: A practical guide. *English Teaching Forum*, 31, 4, pp.16-21.
- Jacobs, G., and H. Stephen. 1994. Implementing cooperative learning. *English Teaching Forum*, 32, 4, pp. 2-4.
- Klassen, J. 1991. Using student errors for teaching. *English Teaching Forum*, 24, 1, pp. 10-16.
- Nunan, D. 1989. *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rivers, W. 1987. *Interactive learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.